DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 981 **RC 011 354**

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TITLE	Student Attainment in Relation to Rural Education.
SPONS AGENCY	Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.; Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.; National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.; Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	May 79
NOTE	23p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Seminar (College Park, Maryland, 29-31 May 1979)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Cultural Images; Demography; Discriminatory Attitudes (Social); *Educational Opportunities; *Employment Opportunities; Linguistics; Modeling (Psychological); Policy Formation; Quality of Life; *Rural Education; *Rural Environment; Rural Urban Differences; *Rural Youth; Socialization; *Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Structural and cultural inequalities hinder the attainment of approximately 25 million rural American youth. A characteristic lack of education and employment opportunities is combined with a restricted realm of attainment in rural areas. Rural people are negatively stereotyped by the mass society, as seen in an examination of linguistic terms describing rural people and activities. This results in cultural oppression with very real consequences in the competition for education and jobs. Social research findings regarding the positive relationship between attainment and social origin, and the influence of "significant others", have positive implications for the success of rural youth programs that encourage achievement. Research on adolescent formation of adult attainment attitudes among rural youth reveals rigid sex stereotyping in occupational choice. This critical difference in the individual processes of achievement between rural males and females is a crucial target for program development. The single most effective policy alternative would be to explicitly identify the rural youth population as a special needs group in existing government programs. Research and development in the areas of occupational knowledge acquisition and transition from education to work in rural areas is needed. (SB)

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RURAL CONVERSATIONS SEMINAR

STUDENT ATTAINMENT IN RELATION TO RURAL EDUCATION*

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*Paper-prepared for the Rural Conversations Seminar held at College Park, Maryland in May of 1979. Special appreciation is expressed to Ivan Charner of the National Manpower Institute for his comments and advise especially on policy alternatives. The paper is based in part on the research monograph, Education and Work in Rural America: The Social Context of Early Career Decisions by Arthur G. Cosby and Ivan Charner (eds.) and the paper "Social Inequality and Educational Achievement in Rural America" by Arthur G. Cosby and J. Steven Picou read at the 1979 AERA meeting, San Francisco, California. Research for both documents was conducted under the auspices of grants from the Home, Community and Work Group, National Institute of Education, Department of Health, Education and Welfare (NIE-G-76-0072); from the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Texas A&M University (TAES H-3141) and from the Cooperative State Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture (Regional Research Project S-114). Data for analysis were obtained by pooling information collected by the Agricultural Experiment Stations of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of the above agencies, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

The Rural Education Seminar was sponsored by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Education, Office of Education's Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the National Institute of Education's Program on Educational Policy and Organization) and the U. S. Department of Agriculture (Science and Education Administration).

RC 011 354

STUDENT ATTAINMENT IN RELATION TO RURAL EDUCATION*

Inequalities Facing Rural Youth

"Why should the issue of social inequality be raised in relation to rural youth - a topic customarily reserved for minorities such as Blacks, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Women, and others who are recognized as not sharing equally in the opportunities and attainments available to most Americans?" The answer seems to lie in a cluster of rural problems that include: a characteristic lack of structural opportunities (for education and occupations); a tendency for mass society not to take rural problems and rural people seriously, and a tradition of rural neglect among many agencies and groups. Objectively, the rural population has historically and is currently experiencing more than its share of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and associated social difficulties (Hassinger, 1978). Rural areas along with the inner-city consistently emerge as residential locales with continuing and serious problems. Unfortunately, however, rural problems have failed to capture society's attention. The preoccupation has clearly been with the urban areas as expressed in the pervasive concern for "the crisis of the city." Rural problems are in comparison somewhat invisible. The dispersed nature of rural life, and consequently of rural problems, makes it relatively impossible to experience rural poverty as emphatically, as dramatically, as that produced by a single visit to an urban slum or ghetto.

Without going into the intricacies of rural social problems, it seems safe to say that for most Americans, rural society does not offer the general opportunity structures available to urban populations. Perhaps the most evident difference in opportunities occurs in the nature of the sharply contrasting economic and occupational advantages associated with

place of residence. The rural economy is often centered around agricultural production and services that support agricultural production. The urban economy, by comparison, is extremely diversified with a wide range of production types and services. Consequently, the rural occupation structure is relatively undifferentiated in types of available work whereas the urban structure has a substantially larger universe of occupational types reflecting both a greater diversity and specialization of work roles (Lipset 1955; Lipset and Bendix 1959). Other things being equal, the net result is that the rural environment typically does not provide as rich a social context for achievement and attainment--the realm of attainment is restricted.

At the individual level, these varying occupational structures often have negative implications for rural youth in their competition for jobs. Obviously, if youth choose to remain in the rural locale, there will be fewer types of jobs that they can realistically consider. The historical trend, of course, has been for rural youth to migrate in large numbers to the cities seeking work. There has been a growing realization that the growth of urban slums has been one by-product of this long term process. For the individual, the act of migration can be seen as a type of social behavior that is a disparity factor in and of itself. That is, migration represents a difficult and disruptive prerequisite for rural youth seeking employment, but not for urban youth. Rural youth who migrate must learn to cope with the new and strange urban environment while they compete for jobs.

In recent years, the migration-work dilemma for rural youth has intensified with the restriction of the economies in metropolitan areas. This slowing in the growth of metropolitan areas has resulted in higher

unemployment rates and tightening of available jobs for many rural youth seeking employment. The long run prospect for the migration option to occupational attainment seems less attractive. It is not difficult to speculate, in light of these trends, that the future demands for rural employment and rural economic development will increase. Obviously, the recent "turnaround" of rural population growth (Beale 1975 and Schwarzweller 1979) and the related migration to rural areas can serve only to accentuate the pressure for rural development.

The prior discussion has centered around the ecology of opportunity, i.e., the actual physical proximity of available occupations and education. It should be recognized that cultural influences can equally limit opportunity. I have heard it said, on a number of occassions, that President Carter sounded stupid "not for what he said but how he said it,"--the reference was to his southern rural accent. Obviously, in some minds, the southern rural accent was being judged inferior. In contrast, President Kennedy's equally distinct accent was never viewed as negatively. Within this simple comparison of cultural definitions of desirable personal attributes lies the seed of cultural based inequities facing rural youth.

For some time now, it has seemed advantageous to me to examine the meaning that mass culture attaches to the notion of rural life or rural folk (Cosby and Charner 1978). American society is a metropolitan based society and the opportunities available for achievement and attainment are in many ways subject to urban dominance. Therefore, the image held about characteristics and potentials of rural folk, especially if they are of a negative stereo-typed nature, can serve as a cultural mechanism for discrimination and limiting of opportunities. Just as stereo-typing of Blacks, Mexican Americans or Women is clearly seen as a form of cultural

oppression, similar commonly held notions about rural folk even if they are milder can represent real obstacles to attainment. If this is the case, there is a very real basis for considering a rural minority or perhaps, more appropriately a Bucolic Minority.

One approach to addressing this issue is a linguistic examination of slang terms used in American society for rural and urban folk. In contrast to the hinterlands of Europe, the notion of peasant or peasantry has never developed as a meaningful concept for rural Americans (Foster 1967). The term "peasant" is apparently considered an unacceptable description in American society, possibly resulting from the ideals developed early in the nations history in association with the creation of a democratic and egalitarian society. Instead, Newton's interpretation of linguistic surveys is that America has no peasants but rather just "plain folks." Cultural geographer E. Estyn Evans (1956) believes that some peasant values do exist, but avoidance of the term peasant has resulted only in the substitution of new labels which supposedly describe rural life and rural people. The evaluative characteristics of these terms are contained in a contrast that can generally be seen as a dichotomy between "urban equals superior" and "rural equals inferior."

My own examination of terms used to describe rural folks indicates not only an inferior or insignificant component but also a cognitive thread that essentially is indicative of a tendency not to take rural people seriously. Although this tendency seems to pervade mass society, I suspect it is even more severe in the academic and intellectual community. Labels for rural folk generally carry a negative cognition and represent more often than not an urban put down of rural folk and rural life. This is readily evident in commonly used slang terms that refer to rural

folk: "hicks, red-necks, plow boys, hillbillies, crackers, shitkickers, clod-hoppers, and good ole boys". This stereo-typing extends into almost every supposed aspect of life in the hinterlands. When "hicks" are not spending their time driving tractors or picking hay seeds out of their hair, they are driving pick-up trucks, chewing tobacco, voting for conservative political candidates, coon hunting, square dancing, quilting, corn husking, swatting flies, whittling, sending donations to religious fundamentalist, or going to Sunday meetings. Based on this brief and incomplete listing, it seems clear that just as other minorities are stereotyped by society, cultural labels about what it supposedly means to be rural is remarkedly stereo-typical in nature. For those who feel that the notion of rural stereo-typing is simply an artifact of this writers misguided imagination, I challenge you to construct a comparable list of terms and labels for urban folk and urban life.

It is tempting to dismiss this point by observing that such stereotyping has been a historical reality in all western societies. Thus, it could be argued that it is "the natural state of affairs" and consequently can't and perhaps shouldn't be changed--it is an inevitability in a society that is rushing toward urban homogeneity. It should be recognized that this historical inevitability argument could have been made, to some degree, in relation to the women's movement and perhaps even racial integration. These arguments aside, the problem remains if rural people are negatively stereo-typed by mass society, it results in a form of cultural oppression that has very real consequences in competition for education and jobs.

One only has to look to the mass media of television as a source where rural stereo-types are reflected and conveyed. Such programs as "Carter Country," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," "Andy Griffin Show,"

"Gomer Pyle," "Petticoat Junction," and "The Dukes of Hazard" perpeptuate the myths of rural life in America. It's no accident, and is consistent with my thesis, that rural people are not taken seriously, that all of these programs are intended as comedies.

There is also some evidence that the perspective and treatment of rural America by national institutions is no more enlightened than would be expected by the mass cultural misconceptions. For the purposes of this seminar, Jonathan Sher's (1978) recent analysis of federal neglect of rural schools is most illustrative. He agrues that (1) contrary to public opinion, the rural sector is a major U.S. constituency; (2) that rural education issues and institutions have not been treated equitably and appropiately by federal education agencies (either in porportion to their population or their needs); and paradoxically (3) that federal aid is designed to benefit disadvantaged or special need in population (a characteristic of many rural groups). I would extend Sher's argument to point out that the rural neglect extends beyond the federal education agencies to the educational and research communities that seems equally inclined to ignore the educational problems of rural schools. Intellectually, rural problems are all too frequently relegated to a category of small and diminishing relics that are also further tainted by their supposed provincial nature.

The Demographics of Rural Youth

Basic descriptive information about the extent and composition of the American rural youth population is not readily available. It can be argued that such information should be a prerequisite for policy discussions. To begin with, the total rural youth population is substantial and even a cursory examination of census data will dispel the myth that

rural youth represent a significant constituency. Using 1970 census estimates as a point of reference, there were over 53.8 million rural people--indicating that about 1 out of every 4 Americans were residing on a farm, in the open country or in a small town or village. Of this considerable population about 46% were less than 25 years of age--a figure suggesting that there were about 25 million rural youth in America (Jimenez, 1974). This estimate should be considered conservative since it uses the census definition of "rural" which excludes many small towns that could reasonably be considered culturally and socially rural (the census definition designated rural towns and villages as those with less than a 2500 population). Also, given the rural turnaround in population growth, this estimate, or at least the number relative to urban populations, should increase in future enumerations. Such figures demonstrate that rural youth comprise a significant population and hardly represent a small and declining segment.

Even among those sympathetic to the needs of rural education, there is often a lack of awareness of important variations in the rural youth population within the nation. Geographically, the numbers of rural youth are not evenly distributed among the major regions. For example, the Southern region is especially strategic since within its bounds resides the largest concentration. Of the approximately 25 million youth, about 10.5 million are located in the Southern United States. The North Central area represents the other major concentration with about 7.4 million rural youth. The remaining 28% are shared by the Southwest, the West and the Northeast. In raising this issue, the point is not to draw attention away from the problems and needs of rural youth in the regions of smaller concentration but rather to highlight that the magnitude of the problems in

terms of raw numbers is regional specific. Obviously, any national thrust in rural research or policy that ignores the special problems of these areas is questionable.

Regional awareness seems to be in a large part a function of personal experience. That is those familiar with the Northeast or those familiar with the South, for example, tend to carry a rural image consistent with their regional experiences. There are certain difficulties with this tendency especially with regards to the tremendous regional variations that can exist in rural education problems. Nowhere is this more clear than in an understanding of the important educational issue of racial and ethnic composition. Although the vast majority of rural youth are classified as white (88%), race and ethnicity are extremely important factors in certain regions. The dominant rural minority are the 2.3 million Black rural youth who reside primarily in the Southern region. In fact, 96% of all rural black youth are located in the 16 Southern states. Other large ethnic groups are the Spanish Heritage (about 3% of the total) which are concentrated in the Southwest and California and the Native Americans (about 1%) which are more dispersed. It is critical that these regional differences be taken into account in the conduct of research and the formulation of policy for rural education. A case in point, Sher's (1977) excellent analysis of the rural school consolidation movement does not adequately deal with the complex interaction between school desegregation in the South and the associated movement toward rural consolidation. That is, rural consolidation was the mechanism for school desegregation in numerous counties. It is my contention that this work, which may represent the most important single contribution to rural education research in the last 10 years, did not take into account perhaps the most important consideration in the recent Southern

consolidation experience. I fully suspect that this occurred because the researchers were carring a image of rural schools based on a New England and possibly Midwest model.

Research Findings On Achievement and Attainment:

The first portion of this paper has centered on the discussion of a series of influences that tend to limit opportunities for achievement and attainment available to rural youth. Obstacles to opportunity were treated as being either structural (the actual physical lack of available educational and occupational opportunities) or cultural (sets of largely stereo-typed misinformation about the characteristics and potentials of rural folk). These two factors generally represent societal conditions which limit the possibility for achievement and attainment. However, they represent only part of the research knowledge about the success chances of any population. Equally important is a second type of research which attempts to determine what aspects of an individual's background, development, or experiences prepares them to take advantage of opportunities that may eixist. In any group, even those with limited opportunities, there is usually considerable variation in attainment and achievement patterns. The research question is to determine factors that explain these differences, for they may emerge as possible variables for policy consideration.

Two traditions of research can be drawn upon as sources of information about individual achievement and attainment. From psychology and education, the well developed research area of occupational choice and occupational development provide excellent sources of information on social maturation or social growth that leads to differential achievement in schools and differential success in entering the labor force (Ginzberg et al., 1951

Super, 1975; Tiedeman, 1961). A second body of research from sociology, status attainment research offers parallel information on the sequence of events and magnitude of influences associated with achievement and attainment (Blau and Duncan 1964; Sewell et al., 1969, 1970; Haller and Portes 1973; Alexander and Eckland 1974). Both bodies of research are based on a long run research strategy that attempts to attain information about a sample of individuals early in their life and then to continue observing them periodically as they mature as adults. By doing so, it is possible to estimate, with some degree of accuracy, how important an event early in life may be for behavior years later.

Research in these two areas have identified a number of influences that tend to either enhance or hinder later life chances. A partial listing of such variables include social origins, intelligence, school effects, social participation, encouragement, occupational knowledge, academic performance, athletic participation, attitude development, self concept, ambition, early marriage and fertility, sex role socialization, as well as, the individual consequences of racial ethnic and sex discrimination. A detailed overview of this voluminous body of literature far exceeds the limits of this paper. Instead, there will be only a brief summary of the general processes evolving from this research with the focus on two or three variables that seem most relevant to rural populations.

Perhaps the most consistent findings in social research is the positive relationship between social origins and attainment. That is, advantages of parental status (occupation, education, income, race, and ethnicity) are transmitted, in some manner, to their children and are reflected in improved life chances. Unfortunately, social origins are fairly difficult to influence in the short run through social policy (social origins are not especially valuable) as policy variables. However, the mechanism through which social origin influences are transmitted is fairly complex

with numerous intervening variables, some of which seem promising for programmatic intervention. The general process through which advantages of social origins influence attainments is one of differential socialization. That is, socialization (formal and informal learning, interpersonal interactions, encouragement, etc.) varies by social origins and, thus, these early socialization experiences tend to provide important competitive advantages in later achievement (Kerchoff and Campbell, 1977). Typically socializing agents are the family, the community, the school, and the peer groups. The policy implication is that while you may not easily be able to influence social origins the intervening master process of socialization does look more promising for programmatic development.

One line of research has been to identify "significant others"--that is, those in the life of an individual who serve as major socializing, selecting and directing agents for achievement. This body of research strongly suggests that those youth who receive a high degree of encouragement for achievement early in their life tend to translate this encouragement into subsequent attainment (Haller, et al., 1969; Woefel and Haller, 1971; Woefel, 1975). Although adequate empirical information is not available to determine rural-urban difference in this variable, it does stand out as a factor of significance for program development. The weight of existing research strongly suggests that any youth program for low attainment groups that enriches the quality and quantity of encouragement for achievement holds promise for success. The power of interpersonal relationships on attainments should be emphasized.

One direct product of socialization for educational and occupational achievement is the acquisition of knowledge about education and occupation. It is reasonable to assume that a broad and reliable knowledge of educational

and occupational information is a prerequisite for an individual in making informed choices and decisions about their future (Rosenburg, 1957; Weiseman, 1976; Howell, 1978). That is, the movement toward a given occupational role is contingent, in part, upon the exploration of alternatives by the use of "information, misinformation, and fantasies" (Moore, 1969; DeFleur and Menke, 1966). The acquisition of knowledge across the youth population seems quite uneven. Research has shown that minorities (Black students) have lower levels of occupational knowledge than whites (Parnes et al., 1970 and Roderick and Davis, 1974). Since occupational knowledge appears to be related to many achievement oriented factors, it would follow that limited access to occupational knowledge is one of those intervening variables that seems highly subject to programmatic influence. My thesis is that many rural youth have limited opportunities with respect to available sources of occupational knowledge, to types of occupational knowledge, and options for a variety of work experiences.

During the adolescent period of development the prior influences of social origins, encouragement, knowledge acquisition, and a number of other developmental factors have been found to impact upon the formation of attitudes toward adult attainment. These attitudes include desire, expectations, and plans for future adult statuses to include occupation, education, residence, marriage, and fertilty. These attitudes are seen as important cognitive components in the process of "taking on the adult role" by directing the youth toward later adult behaviors. A series of studies have shown that attitudes measured during high school are predictive of corresponding adult behaviors observed years later (Cosby and Charner, 1978). Youth who desire high level occupations tend to have higher occupational attainment; youth who want more education tend to achieve it;

youth who want to live in the cities tend to move there; and youth who want to marry early tend to do so.

Research on rural populations reveal several consequences of the adolescent attitude formation with regards to race and sex status. The data suggests that the actual content of the attitudes, on the one hand, and the ability to translate these attitudes into behavior differ remarkably. Rural males tend to select a large and varied number of occupational choices as both desires and expectations in their adolescent attitude development. Rural women, however, tend to restrict their frame of reference to a few occupational types that can easily be classified as "traditional female pursuits" (Picou and Howard, 1978; Dunne, 1979). Such choices as teacher, secretary, nurse, beautician, and housewife typify female responses. It is my interpretation that this sex stereo-typing is the critical difference in the individual processes of achievement between rural males and females and constitutes a critical target for program development.

An associated sex differences in the attainment process is the greater depressing impact of certain familial influences on female achievement. Desires for early marriage, desires for early child bearing, actual early marriage, and actual early child bearing have been found to have a much greater limiting effect upon women's achievement chances than for males who hold similiar attitudes or have similiar experiences (Cosby and Charner, 1978). This implies that in the development of programs for women achievement, education, and occupation, the significance of such factors as birth control, knowledge about marriage and the family, and the consequences of early marriage should play an important role in programs designed for women.

A comparison of the attitudinal frame between races does not reveal such sharp differences as that observed for sex. For example, the aspi-

rations and expectations for higher achievement was quite similiar for both Black and white rural males. Both groups show a strong tendency to orient themselves toward the "American success theme" of high prestige jobs and a college education. The primary race difference, however, appears in the differential ability to translate these into actual attainment. Rural black males were much less likey to obtain the occupation and education they desired or expected as adolescents (Cosby and Charner, 1978).

This overview of sex and race differences in the career decision process of rural youth can be summarized in two themes, both of which may have salience for the design of programs intended to improve the attainments of these groups. First, sex differences in the process generally involved the content of career preferences (restricted sex-typed orientations) and the greater depressing effects of familial influences on attainment. Blacks, however tended to have greater difficulties in transmitting advantages achieved at any stage in the process to the next phase. Consequently, programs directed toward rural women would emphasize expansion of the preference content of orientation and perhaps the consequences of early marriage and fertility on attainment. Programs designated for rural Blacks would perhaps be more effective focusing on means and strategies of transmitting preferences into attainment.

Policy Alternatives

Currently, the occupational structure of most rural communities simply do not provide sufficient numbers and types of rewarding work opportunities for rural youth. High employment and, just as seriously, under employment are endemic to these areas. Additionally, the educational and work experiences that do exist are often geared to declining occupations or to occupations

in which there are few openings (Charner, 1979). A significant development of educational economic activities is necessary to improve the attainment opportunities of rural youth. An intergration of federal, state and local involvement committed to rural development is crucial. To reiterate, a point made earlier in the paper, it is nonsense to talk about achievement and attainment processes in the absence of opportunity and, opportunity, in this case seems best translated as the economic and educational development of rural areas.

The comprehensive Employment Tra ning Act, and the Youth Employment Demonstration Act are examples of programs that have potential direct or indirect effects upon youth opportunities. It seems, however, that rural areas which are among those in greatest need seem less likely to benefit from them. These job programs tend to favor high density populations over those with more dispersed program clients. I would wager that the ease of administration in high density areas coupled with existing standards of accountability that do not explicitly include rural youth contribute to the advantages of the urban area. I fully suspect that the vast majority of national development programs have this tendency.

Based on the above considerations the single most effective policy alternative would be to explicitly identify rural youth populations as a special needs group in existing governmental programs, and, futhermore, require the same standards of accountability presently being used for other special groups. Since the overall attainment process for both rural and urban youth is essentially the same (with a few important exceptions) most programs that have been designed to enhance the process for the nation, or for urban areas, may also be applicable to rural areas. The problem of an existing system of emphasis, accountability and equity

that does not favor rural America.

Sher's (1978) recent essay that presents, "A Proposal to End Federal Neglect of Rural Schools," provides a comprehensive set of recommendations that are consistent with both my perception of rural educational needs and governmental policies would serve to meet these needs. In my opinion, his recommendations are so valuable to the deliberations of this Seminar that I have included them below in abstracted form.

1. Reform existing programs to reflect rural needs:

    a. Re-examine all formula--based funding programs and revise any that discriminate against rural communities.

    b. Re-examine all criteria used to award competitive grants and contracts and make the changes necessary to end the exclusion of rural applicants.

    c. Inaugurate across-the-board-rural set-asides and competitions.

2. Create new rural programs:

    a. A federally funded/state-administered Rural Advisory Service (RAS).

    b. Teacher training for rural service.

    c. Inservice education programs for rural teachers, administrators and school board members.

    d. Link rural education and rural development activities.

    e. Rural resource cooperatives.

    f. Rural School construction and renovation.

3. Create a national research initiative on rural education:

    a. Creating a policy center for rural education attached to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Education (ASE).

    b. Developing a rural component in the National Center for Education Statistics.

    c. Creating a National Center on Rural Education under the auspices of the National Institute of Education.

In addition to endorsing the broad recommendations being made by Sher, I would like to highlight two specific areas of particular needs for research and development. These are, the problems of occupational knowledge acquisition in rural areas and the problem of the transition from education to work for rural youth. Alternative delivery systems need to be developed to provide rural youth with timely and useful educational and occupational knowledge. Research into the sources, types, and processes of learning about occupations in rural areas should be carried out and the findings utilized to enhance learning programs. Curriculum and computer approaches should be adapted to meet the special geographic and social conditions of rural students. The development and use of innovative delivery systems such as mobile information units, telephone calling programs, and remote computer hook ups are promising approaches to reaching the diversified and dispersed rural population (Charner, 1979).

The transition from education to work problem is more difficult to attack, especially with regard to rural minorities and ethnic groups. It is obviously closely tied to the overall economic development of rural communities. But this, when it occurs, does not necessarily impact equally for all groups within the community. Just because educational and occupational opportunities increase, it does not mean that Blacks, Spanish Surname youth, or Women will compete equally. Since rural minorities currently have difficulty in translating desires and expectations into actual attainment, new programs that are not sensitive to the special problems of rural minorities could serve to increase the gap at the same time they appear successful in overall rural development.

In Closing

In the pages of this paper, I have dwelt on the problems, difficulties, and inequities facing rural youth. In retrospect, my treatment paints a bleak and depressing picture of rural life. In a very real sense this is misleading since it does not convey my true feelings about the many positive aspects of rural areas; I desire to live nowhere else. There are many attractive features about the quality of life that exist even among its problems. Small town and country living afford the possibilities for a degree of community, friendship, independence, recreation, and a more relaxed, sensible life style that is difficult to achieve in the city. My comments and suggestions are made in the spirit of improving the quality of rural living and at the same time perserving it's many positive features.

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